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The Man Who Couldn't Forget

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The man who couldn't forget

On the way out to Dickinson, North Dakota, we talked about my uncle Dean's gun collection, and how he could have discharged his Colt forty-five while he was cleaning it. Accidents do happen. And then my dad, gripping the steering wheel between his fingers, waited for my mother to nod off to sleep, her head resting against the passenger door window with Prince, our Pomeranian, nestled in her lap.

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A mechanic at Morrey's Imports, the dealer my dad bought the car from, said the Jaguar XJ 12 L would do one hundred and fifty. The dog wasn't making any noise, and while my dad thought my mother and I were asleep, he ran the Jaguar up to nearly one-hundred-and-forty-five and then backed down again. It was a long and boring ride the rest of the way, and I was glad, sort of, to be getting near Dean's house. I say sort of because, well, you know how all that funeral stuff is — somber, black dresses, pies no one wants to eat and all those people coming up to you and telling you how wonderful the dead person was.

Dean was wonderful; there was a write up on him in the *Minnesota Daily* years back when he was an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota.

"The man who can't forget," the *Daily's* article read. The article listed his academic achievements, and under the last column they put his picture: he had a sad smile that bent down in the corners. The article talked about my uncle Dean's photographic memory. He would read something once, and if you asked him to read back a paragraph, or a whole page, he would just stare into space and ramble off the stuff you wanted him to. I would have never seen the article, but one day I was rummaging through some old pictures of my dad's family around Christmas, and the article was in the bottom of the box under all the pictures.

What had happened to Dean in California was still a mystery to me, and my father didn't talk about it much. Dean went to Harvard to

study Law. He finished in record time and started a practice out in California — I think it was in Sacramento. Anyway, there was some kind of fracas out there and he moved to Dickinson, North Dakota. Jesus, what a move.

That's when I got to know my cousins Odie and Diana — they liked to visit the twin cities. Diana was the first girl I knew who "developed" early. Those two unmistakably feminine features made her instantly popular with boys. I felt weird being her cousin and all, but I liked them, too. Odie and Diana that is. They didn't like the rural life much, and soon they were both in trouble. Odie was smoking loads of pot and Diana was (as Odie said) doing like the livestock did. Well, she and Odie got in a lot of trouble.

It seems that both of them had inherited their father's gift, at least part of it, and that left them with time on their hands because school wasn't any kind of challenge for them. Diana got herself knocked up, and Odie was caught with possession of a few ounces of pot. Back in those days a few ounces were enough to land you in the slammer for up to a few years, and Dean had to work like hell to keep his Odie out of Jail.

That Odie was a real card. I remember once when I was twelve and he was fifteen, he came to St. Paul to visit. He was real lanky then, and he liked to do stuff like visit the ice arena in town just to hang out and watch the girls. I guess they liked to watch him, too. One Saturday afternoon, when we had come back from the arena down the block from my house, I asked Odie what his secret with the girls was. I was just getting interested in them myself and was wondering what I was doing wrong so far.

"Don't do anything," Odie said smiling.

"Don't do anything?"

"No, just sit there," he said. "They can tell if you know your stuff. Then you don't have to say anything. It scares the hell out of them but they like it. Really, they do. They just act like they don't know what's going on. You know what I mean?"

I nodded.

"I thought you would," he said. "You're pretty sharp." I didn't even bother to nod to that.

Odie had a farm driver's permit already, and he used it in the cities even though he couldn't legally drive on the highways with it. That didn't matter to Odie. In fact, he seemed to like the idea that at any time the cops could pick him up and raise hell. He figured Dean would always bail him out. Maybe he was right. Dean had always bailed him out in the past.

One night Odie took me to see "Dirty Harry" at a theater across town. We even snuck into the theater and saw it for free. It was the first R rated film I had seen, and I wondered, as the film started, if I

would turn into a sexual pervert and all. We got some popcorn and pepsi and the film started and Dirty Harry Callihan was chasing that psycho across the rooftops in San Francisco, a real good part, when Odie says:

"Come on, I got to go to the can." I wondered why the hell he couldn't wait, but I got up to go with him anyway, walking backwards, watching the film until I tripped and fell onto someone's lap. Odie laughed like hell. I didn't think it was that funny.

Standing in the empty can, I walked up to a urinal and made an effort to pee. Odie walked up to the one next to mine and unbuckled his pants. I guess people on farms do that. I'd never seen anyone in the city pee like that. In the city everyone made an effort to kind of hide it. Not Odie.

"See this here?" he said pointing. "That's the secret I was talking about." It was unusually large. I nodded again. I wagged mine a few times, giving up on the effort to pee, and then Odie was talking again.

"These things are good for more than peeing, you know." I didn't know what to say.

"I don't want to miss too much of the film, Odie," I said.

"No, really," he said standing there with his pants half down.

"Got me a french tickler here, girlie," he said laughing. I had heard about french ticklers from someone at school. Jesus, what a nut.

Back in the theater he was still laughing.

Anyway, that was Odie. They drafted him in '67 and he came back in a body bag in '68. That was the year Diana got married, too. She married some moron that was working as a supervisor at the local grocery. No one knew why she did it, but maybe it had something to do with all the religious crap she and her boyfriend got into.

Diana had never been religious. Quite the opposite, in fact. I remember her telling me how she and her boyfriend (That was Dwight — her folks had never liked Dwight) took some acid and went to their church on a Saturday night, and when everyone came in for mass, they did it up in the loft while they were tripping.

"It was great," she said. "There was the organ, and all the people out there chanting away, and Dwight and I were trying not to laugh, and all the while we were getting it on up there, those damn nuns were counting their rosaries." That always got Diana laughing. I shrugged my shoulders and laughed with her. You know, sort of funny, but not really funny.

Dwight ran off with one of Diana's girlfriends.

"Never want to see that fucking bastard again," she said. "That asshole can do whatever he pleases and so will I."

"That must really feel bad when, ah, someone like that, well, just leaves," I said.

"He can stay gone," she said. "I've forgotten that fucker already."

A couple of months after that, she met Art. Art had beamed at her across the counter at the Safeway store in Dickinson, and Diana had responded by licking her lips — that's what she told me, anyway. He blushed, and after that Diana took a perverse delight in making him blush when she went to get groceries. By that time she was living away from home in her own apartment. Diana finally asked him over on a Saturday night, and when he didn't make the usual moves, she asked him what the problem was; he went off on this speech about women as people and all that. Turned out he was a born again, and a virgin, too. Well, they both got an education. Diana found out about the true way, and Arthur found out about another way.

Diana joined Arthur's church five months later, and Arthur, having already forgotten Diana's past, proposed to her. Diana accepted, and we were all surprised; Dean had mentioned the "monk" Diana was dating. Anyway, Diana came to visit our family in St. Paul that summer, and god, if she didn't give me a lot of Jesus and damnation crap! I thought I'd puke. Christ, I liked the old Diana —at least she was honest.

Sitting in a booth in a Bridgeman's Ice Cream Parlor, we talked about her "revelation" while we had some root-beer floats.

"But I'm so happy now that I know the Lord, Mike," she said leaning across the table. "Really, you've got to get to know the Lord, too. It's like...If you had cancer, and it hurt, bad, and someone took the pain away," she said. I scratched my head.

"I don't know, Diana. I really don't know," I said to her while I poked at a blob of ice cream floating in my glass of root beer.

"Nobody knows," she said jabbing her straw at me like a lance. "That's why you need him. He'll change all those things in the past that you can't let go of. He'll set you free." And then she smiled at me with a wide and vacuous smile.

It must have been a colossal effort for her to make herself believe all that. Or maybe she just needed it then. Whatever. A year later, she and Arthur separated. He accused her of infidelity and alcoholism, and she accused him of being a faggot. Diana did have a "chemical dependancy problem," so she stayed at her folks house, attending AA meetings on Thursdays and getting sloshed on Fridays.

And Dean, he seemed to take it all in stride. At family get-togethers Dean always had that funny smile. He and Mick, his wife, were always clowning around. He liked to rub his knuckles over my scalp when I was really little. One year he got me a dog. He was in town on some business — no one in my family knew he was in town — and right around nine, he banged on the door and surprised us all.

"Hey! How you doing, sport!" he said pulling a tiny pomeranian puppy out of his jacket and holding him out to me. "Happy Birthday!" Dean was like that.

From the back seat, I watched my dad out of the corner of my eye, wondering how much he was like Dean — at the wheel, with his Ray-Ban aviator's glasses on, my dad looked a lot like him.

He turned around and squeezed my knee. "You awake back there?"

"Sure," I said. "You know how much longer it'll be?"

"About another hour," he said looking at the map folded on top of the shifter console. "You getting some rest?"

"No. Not really," I said, leaning forward between the two front seats. "I was just thinking. I always wanted a photographic memory like Dean's. That way I could just go flying through school and get great grades and never study and make lots and lots of money."

"Oh," my dad said, not turning away from the road to look at me, "I don't know if what Dean had was so great. It nearly killed him in California. Got to know too much about too many people, and they didn't like that. No one did."

"But just to never worry about forgetting all the time," I said watching his mouth tighten. He took off his glasses and pushed them into his breast pocket. He glanced at the road and then at me.

"I wouldn't want Dean's kind of memory too much," he said craning his neck so he could look into my eyes; then he turned around, put those dark glasses back on, and stared through the windshield, silent, all the way to Dickinson.